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ABSTRACT

Although Allan Bloom in "The Closing of the American Mind" and Mike Rose in "Lives on the Boundary" reveal an almost endless list of obvious differences of perspective on literacy and higher education in America, both take divergent yet similar routes to create a permanent place for liberal education. Both Bloom and Rose use the "Gothic Cathedral" metaphor to describe the spiritual aspect of literacy, examining the youthful passion which leads to the uplifting freedom and empowerment of the soul. Both promote freedom from mediocrity and limitations for their students; both want their students to benefit directly from stored knowledge. Based on years of experience in preparing students for productive careers and successful adult lives, both argue for student competence in the social and cultural language of democracy. Despite the differences in emphasis and example, Bloom and Rose are complementary in that both represent a dynamic and passionate search for literacy. As their arguments emerge, reflections and duplications of each other become evident. To omit or devalue one of the viewpoints would be to remove the spiritual focus as well as an integral part of this complex issue. (KEH)

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by

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Onomastic Mirroring: "The Closing of the American Mind" by Alan Bloom and "Lives on the Boundary" by Mike Rose.

by

Karl Heit

Allan Bloom in The Closing of The American Mind and Mike Rose in Lives on the Boundary seemingly present fundamentally disparate viewpoints on literacy and higher education in America. Bloom prescribes a "Back to the Future" approach through which students can (re)discover the glorious roots and creative spirit of Western thought contained in the Great Books. Rose, on the other hand, points to successful "Awakenings" of socially and intellectually isolated students, as they triumphantly enter communities of academic discourse.

An initial examination of both books reveals an almost endless list of obvious differences of perspective, opinion, and example. Bloom, with all the `elan of a noble thinker who is presenting a well-conceived homily, discloses the diminished capacity for scholastic expression evidenced by his elite students, their reduced thirst for knowledge, their preoccupation with material gain, and their unquestioning allegiance to equality and relativism as reflected by their openness. Rose, in the fashion of ethnographer and classroom teacher, takes great care, on the other hand, to depict accurately and anecdotally the struggles of remedial students to measure up to prescribed standards and to realize their dreams of becoming more productive members of society through their educational achievements. Despite these differences,

the goal for both Bloom and Rose remains analogous, i.e., student competence in the social and cultural language of democracy. Both promote freedom for their students from mediocrity and limitations; both want their students to benefit directly from stored knowledge.

It is not the purpose of this paper to pronounce final judgment on the validity and correctness of one position over the other. To do so would diminish the scope of the problem and would, at this point, conflict with the very nature of democratic and Socratic debate. It is readily apparent that both authors are basing their arguments on years of experience in preparing college students for productive careers and successful adult lives. As such, both have much to offer. Taken together, these multiple views represent a *more* comprehensive and accurate overview, but they should further serve to elicit additional as well as evaluative commentary from other educators. The discussion in this paper attempts to do both.

The divergent yet similar routes taken by Bloom and Rose to create a permanent place for liberal education in the curriculum of higher education brings to mind the novel Narcissus Und Goldmund by Hermann Hesse, an early twentieth century German writer. In this medieval allegory, Hesse depicts the educational development of two totally different individuals in their lifelong quest for knowledge and meaning. One embarks on an inward pilgrimage which, marked by extraordinary discipline, leads from priesthood to sainthood; the other launches passionately into the lifestyle of a vagabond but, despite mindless escapades, is destined to become a renowned artist. While adolescents, the two meet under an Italian chestnut tree in the middle of a monastery courtyard and from there the individual journeys begin, divergent, yet preordained to culminate in synthesis and harmony. Despite the many remarkable contrasts, over time the two essentially become

reflections of one another, which is masterfully created through onomastic mirroring.

For Rose, the journey begins under the jacarandas of sunny southern California, as he looks into the hopeful hearts and motivated minds of his students while simultaneously recalling his own humble beginning. Bloom's journey begins in the shadows of a quasi-gothic shell of a cathedral, where he contemplates his own learning in relation to the giants of the past, his illustrious colleagues, and his underling students. As educators, Bloom wishes to see a mirrored image of his well-formed thoughts in the eyes and minds of his students, while Rose wishes to extricate his students from their internal and external hindrances to learning, thereby fashioning new life. Over time both Bloom and Rose, however, ultimately reverse roles, and the vital cycle will start anew.

In the beginning and end of his book Rose directly addresses the role of Great Books and the value of classical humanistic knowledge in the context of a humane liberal education. Rose states that although such curricula have "traditionally served to exclude working-class people from the classroom," this doesn't necessarily have to be the sad reality of education. His personal experiences as student and teacher presented in the middle of the book in the form of vignette, reflection and analysis serve as case in point. His main contention, however, is that the initiators to the canon may not realize that there is more to their work than the mastery of a tradition. To promote successful "entry into that solemn library of Western thought," Rose argues that teachers need to assume the role of mentors and should carefully consider the social context affecting individual performance, i.e., the political, economic, and cultural forces that encourage or inhibit learning. Rose is

fearful of the potential failure by students to make necessary connections and of their subsequent apathy and withdrawal.

However, it is precisely in his conceptualization of *prejudice* and *spirit*, that Bloom makes his greatest contribution to the language of democracy, thereby making connections possible and the liberal arts assessable to students. According to Bloom, students of various backgrounds are unified by their common belief in the relativism of truth. Students have a difficult time defending their opinion because they have been indoctrinated by an education system promoting the "democratic personality" of openness rather than scholarship. Bloom then identifies two kinds of openness: indifference which deadens students as evidenced by their marking time, and the quest for knowledge which animates students. It is the latter through which educators can rekindle or fashion the productive *spirit* of the students. Bloom alludes to the comments once made by a professor of psychology, whose explicit aim was to rid students of prejudice as well as to infuse them with a love for truth and unbiased beliefs. Bloom expresses concern that such teaching does not attempt to replace these prejudices with anything substantial, rather merely renders the students disconsolate and indifferent. Bloom's call for educators to teach *prejudice*, i.e., to take a spirited and informed stand, is interesting and challenging, and most certainly not out of line with Rose. For Rose, students are at the "intersection of their lives," in need of developing their own abilities to think critically and to gain confidence as "systematic inquirers." If students at this juncture are restricted to basic error correction rather than engaged in higher level cognitive thought, their failure to successfully pursue their fleeting dreams will only lead to greater withdrawal.

The following quote from Bloom has an interesting connection to Richard Paul's notion of emancipatory reasoning. Bloom argues that "one

has to have the experience of really believing before one can have the thrill of liberation." Paul, like Bloom, sees closed-mindedness in students, but argues that they need to be freed from their childhood ego-identification with adult beliefs so they can reason dialectically. Bloom, however, believes that students must not only be freed from their basic and ill-defined biases (mostly created through a spirit of disenchanted openness), but they also need to form strongly-held beliefs which can then be used in the "thrill of liberation" through logical and dialectical reasoning. Paul never fully develops this aspect of thinking, and the message for educators seems loud and clear: erroneous opinions point the way to truth, and as such, errors require respectful treatment and should be welcomed. No taxonomy or treatise on critical thinking that I have viewed articulates this aspect of thought development, which can loosely be termed the "spirit of prejudice."

The following metaphor, which illustrates the literacy dilemma and the inevitable Goldmund-Narcissist relationship between Rose and Bloom, seems especially appropriate in the context of Bloom's suggestion that students no longer even have a shared knowledge of the Bible as they once had. The disciplined and wise scholar declares that students have not been condemned to hell, rather they have merely been banished to a purgatorial and spiritless existence. Students have either been subjected to culture-specific lists of critical reading commandments in the hopes they can measure up to the standards set forth in the taxonomies of critical thinking law; or students have been given the means to purge themselves from faulty indoctrinations and thoughts, through obtaining the freely bestowed and readily accessible emancipation. Students and society alike must heed the call. The youngish and spirited educator has personally paid the price and can

point the way to help students ascend to the realm of higher order thinking, where bliss and meaning abound for all if they sincerely try.

Both Bloom (pp 129, 243-4) and Rose (p 46) also use the Gothic cathedral metaphor to describe the passion of a young man who discovers first-hand the spirit of learning and who becomes connected to the uplifting freedom and potential of his soul. The Gothic points to the domain of the Great Books: lofty and imposing, yet inspirational and meaningful to all who enter. Interestingly, this idea is traceable to the essay over German architecture, Von Deutsche Baukunst, written by the 22 year-old Goethe while a university student in Strassburg in the mid-eighteen century. The young Goethe, on the brink of discovering his poetic genius, declares the Strassburg cathedral, the then tallest Gothic edifice in Europe, superior to French grace and Italian beauty. Refuting the prevalent criticism finding Gothic architecture barbaric and vulgar, Goethe portrays its *passion*, spirit, and lawlessness, much like the unbridled genius and majesty leaping forth from the dramas of Shakespeare.

In many respects, Bloom's university experiences as student and teacher are analogous to those of the young Goethe. For both this is a time of anticipation, a time to passionately embrace the new knowledge awaiting them. Bloom is about to be admitted into the "presence of some authentically great thinkers who give living proof of the existence of theoretical life." He will be engulfed by the atmosphere of "free inquiry." Goethe will issue the Sturm-und-Drang battle cry (through the poem Prometheus, who steals fire from the gods) to free German writers from the shackles of conventional and French-inspired literature. Also, both describe how the Gothic buildings are reflections of their contemporary society and spirit. Goethe's experiences will extend to the door of the Golden Age of German literature; Bloom's will lead

back to the hallowed halls of higher education. For Bloom the "promise of these buildings was fully kept."

Moreover, it is interesting that Bloom uses this form of architecture to lead into the spiritual aspect underlying his description of education, while Goethe uses it to describe the emancipation of the "spiritual genius" within the artist. For Bloom, the pseudo-gothic appears to represent the failure of American education to create the "spirit" and "inspiration" of the glorious tradition of intellectual thought. What remains are the disenchanted students and the empty shell of an unauthentic building.

It was through a slide show on Gothic architecture that Rose, the struggling student, felt himself "rising up." He wanted to be released from "the despair" that surrounded him and from his "own troubled sense of exclusion." Knowledge and learning initially meant freedom for Rose, and later evolved into empowerment. Rose as teacher carries this word of hope for his students, freeing them from the stranglehold of the repugnant medieval image of the goddess of grammar, Grammatica (pp 1 and 2).

In his discussion of the passion for reasoning, Bloom (p 308) refers to Goethe's Sturm-und-Drang drama Faust. The scholar Faust translates the first line of the Gospel According to John, "In the beginning was the word," (logos), then dissatisfied with the description says "the feeling," and finally reinterprets it as "the deed." Herein lies the idea of spirit. Bloom states, "action has primacy over contemplation, deed over speech," and "the act of the creator, not preceded nor controlled by thought, is the first thing." Put into the context of our discussion, the following point is offered: Bloom contemplates and conceptualizes, but Rose acts. Both, however, are essential, as they are reflections of each other.

Although there are numerous differences between Bloom and Rose, it is my assertion that they are complementary in that both make possible a dynamic and vital representation of the passionate search for literacy. Also, to omit or devalue one of the viewpoints would be to remove the spiritual focus of this issue. I have, therefore, attempted to look beyond some of the assumptions and omissions by Bloom that originally disturbed me, and I have thereby found appreciation for the spirit of the argument. Following are some specific examples of problematic assumptions by Bloom, counterbalanced by Rose.

First, Bloom bases his entire argument on his experiences with elite students, but Rose represents the marginal students. Second, Bloom generalizes and judges an entire generation of student; Rose characterizes individual differences and displays empathy for learners. Third, Bloom has no specific evidence to support his position other than personal observation and profound insight; Rose includes statistics and cites his sources. Fourth, Bloom points to societal changes of the last three decades to account for decreasing verbal abilities of students. Rose, on the other hand, argues that literacy is an ongoing problem of cultural subcultures and that educators' dissatisfaction with students' writing abilities has always existed in higher education, not just now. (He cites several sources on pages 5-8.) Furthermore, Bloom views students as empty shells, living in a Kafkaesque world of displaced values and undefined boundaries. Rose sees individuals desperately seeking to understand the "Babel talk" of a conceptually isolated faculty. Finally, Bloom presents a very male-oriented position and repeatedly seems to champion a movement for the rebirth of "maleness or spiritedness" (p 129). Rose does not seek to reestablish the masculine tradition of hierarchy

and authoritative achievement, rather proffers a human-centered process of learning that is relational, collaborative, and integrated.

The list of differences can easily be extended, but I am not alarmed by it. Although I still have an inclination toward Rose, influenced in part by my bias against Hirsch and his core national vocabulary, I feel my understanding of this complex issue is vastly improved by the perspective presented by Bloom. This paper represents an attempt to interact critically and creatively with the positions outlined in both texts, in the spirit of Paul's emancipatory reasoning. I feel much the richer for permitting both writers equal access to my heart and reason.

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